Race and gender obsession creates a theatrical travesty

Identity politics smothers the life out of *1776* revival

Fred Mazelis
27 November 2022

The current New York City revival of the 1969 musical, *1776*, is now in the middle of a limited run on Broadway presented by the Roundabout Theatre Company. The show, co-directed by Diane Paulus and Jeffrey Page, originated at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The revival has been described as a "gender-swapped" version. The delegates to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia that adopted the Declaration of Independence are represented by a cast of "female, transgender and non-binary individuals." The founders were only men, of course, but in this revival they have been pointedly excluded. The cast is mostly but not entirely African-American. The actor who plays Thomas Jefferson is visibly pregnant.

The casting stunt is superimposed on the story of the weeks of difficult and at times deadlocked deliberations that ended with the adoption of the famous document authored by Jefferson. This is not colorblind casting, but its opposite: race- and gender-conscious casting. The actual history of the founding of the US is obscured. The revival is mostly unsuccessful in making the events of 1776 come alive in the 21st century. Then again, perhaps that is not its aim.

The 1969 show featured a book by Peter Stone, with music and lyrics by Sherman Edwards. Stone, known for screenplays like *Charade* (1963) and adaptations of works based on Federico Fellini (*Sweet Charity*, 1969), George Bernard Shaw (*Androcles and the Lion*, 1967) and others, was the eventual recipient of Emmy, Tony and Oscar awards for his work. Edwards, a songwriter as well as a jazz pianist, was less well known in the field of music theater, with *1776* being his main claim to recognition.

The show created by this pair is in some respects unusual. At certain moments it almost seems a hybrid between play and musical, with Stone's script playing a particularly important role. Indeed, at one point in Act One, a full half hour elapses between musical numbers, although the drama of the Continental Congress does not flag.

The original show ran for a more than respectable 1,217 performances. It received the Tony Award for Best Musical, and was followed by a film version in 1972. The film version included many of the same actors, including especially the excellent performances of William Daniels as John Adams, Howard da Silva (who had been blacklisted during the period of the McCarthyite witch-hunt) as Benjamin Franklin and Ken Howard as Jefferson.

What made audiences respond as they did? While *1776* took a few liberties with the historical record (there were in fact 55 delegates, not the more manageable 20 in the musical), the deliberations that took place were presented with overall faithfulness to the historical record. There was little sentimentality. *1776* did not mythologize the Founding Fathers. It effectively used the figures of Adams, Franklin, Jefferson and others to dramatize the events that led to the first successful struggle for independence from monarchical rule, and the emergence of the first successful democratic republic in modern history.

The latest revival keeps all of these men, although they are not acted by men. The dialogue and lyrics are basically unchanged. Adams is an irascible and impatient fighter for independence, Franklin is a wily and pragmatic politician, at the age of 70 by far the oldest of the convention delegates, and Jefferson is the young Virginian, only 33 at the time, reserved but eloquent.

Among the other delegates in this musical reenactment are John Hancock from Massachusetts, the chairman of the proceedings; Robert Livingston of New York, who abstains, "courteously," throughout the voting; John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, loyal to the Crown and a bitter opponent of independence; Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, portrayed as a flamboyant dealmaker who works to bring the slave-owning South behind the cause; and Edward Rutledge of South Carolina, the political leader of the Southern colonies.

The delegates are featured in amusing musical numbers, among them "Sit Down, John," when the assembled delegates vent their frustration with the sharp-tongued Adams; "The Lees of Old Virginia," where the delegate from Virginia boasts of his pedigree and influence; and "The Egg," in which Franklin, Jefferson and Adams debate which bird to choose as symbol of the new nation, finally agreeing to Adams' proposal of the eagle.

Important in a different way is "Momma, Look Sharp," featuring, instead of any convention delegates, a courier who sings the words of a dying young soldier, dramatizing the human cost sometimes overlooked or minimized in popular accounts of the Revolutionary War.

There are two women characters, each with significant roles: Abigail Adams, the formidable wife of John, with whom he conducts imaginary conversations ("Till Then" and "Yours, Yours, Yours"); and Martha Jefferson, who pays what might be termed a conjugal visit to her loving husband in Philadelphia ("He Plays the Violin"), as he labors on the Declaration.

Two of the most well-known numbers in the musical—"Cool, Cool, Considerate Men" and "Molasses to Rum"—are especially ill-served, as explained below, by a revival that emphasizes what it calls "gender expansiveness."

The casting is designed to have it both ways. Paulus professes a kind of condescending respect for the original version. She claims in a recent interview that she and her co-director Page aimed to "hold history as a predicament, rather than an affirming myth." The non-male cast supposedly draws attention to the open-ended character of the "American experiment," to all those overlooked in 1776.

By implication, according to Paulus, the original *was* an affirming myth. But, as already indicated, it was nothing of the kind. There was nothing

© World Socialist Web Site

sanctimonious or one-dimensional about its characters. And much of the second act is taken up with the question of the slave trade, and the eventual compromise of anti-slavery principles by Adams, Franklin and Jefferson in order to get the agreement of the Southern states to the Declaration.

The Revolution, as for the most part correctly depicted by both the book and lyrics of *1776*, was neither a "predicament" nor an "affirming myth." It was a revolutionary step forward for the colonies and for the entire world, but it was also the product of its time, and the bourgeois democratic republic to which it gave birth faced enormous new challenges in a world transformed over the following two centuries. A second great revolution was necessary, this time to abolish chattel slavery, and the modern working class that first emerged in the period after the Civil War is destined to make revolutionary history once more.

Paulus and Page's version of *1776* is not the dramatic equivalent of the toppling of the statues of Jefferson, as happened when racial chauvinists took advantage of the justified outrage at the police murder of George Floyd two years ago. Jefferson and the others are not cast as monsters. Indeed, they could not have been, as long as Paulus used the 1969 musical. But neither are they fully recognized and imagined in this revival. The impression left is that it is necessary to cut them down to size. Kristolyn Lloyd as Adams, Patrena Murray as Franklin and Elizabeth A. Davis as Jefferson, as well as others in the cast, are clearly talented, but they are sadly miscast. The defense of democratic rights of women, transgender people and others is not advanced by such swapping of gender roles.

For all of its supposed daring, the casting stunt involves no imagination or creativity. It is reminiscent of the work of painter Kehinde Wiley, who, as a WSWS review once pointed out, "copies European Old Masters paintings, substituting African Americans in contemporary, hip hop street garb in the poses of aristocrats and other wealthy figures of power and privilege."

There has been some comparison of this revival with *Hamilton*, the huge hit musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda. *Hamilton* is not without serious weaknesses. The WSWS review pointed out that its casting choices and its exaggeration of Hamilton's significance among the Founders seemed aimed—in the spirit of identity politics—at demonstrating the power of "upward mobility" in capitalist America. But *Hamilton*, unlike the revival of *1776*, is original and often effective. Its use of hip-hop and its young and multiracial cast in a brand-new show is very different from rigidly imposing an artistically banal identity politics dogma on a show that originated more than half a century earlier.

The example of *Hamilton* also exposes the artistic poverty and laziness behind the idea of simply "updating" the setting of well-known musical theater, without any original words and music. This has become increasingly frequent in opera, and almost always fails to fully capture the power of the original. Whatever one's opinion of *Hamilton*, it is inspired by a unified and coherent conception, and is not a copy of someone else's work.

Paulus and Page are suggesting that the fact that the Continental Congress excluded blacks and women was just as important as the fact that it adopted the Declaration of Independence. At any rate, they imply that the only reason for reviving the 1969 musical today, and the only way it could be revived, is to make this "exclusion" its main theme. This kind of anachronistic falsification of history is similar to that which led Nikole Hannah-Jones, in the *New York Times*' discredited 1619 Project, to portray the American Revolution as a counterrevolution.

Instead of letting the story of *1776* speak powerfully for itself, this revival is weakest in some of the musical's most effective numbers. These include the famous "Cool, Cool, Considerate Men," when Dickinson of Pennsylvania leads some of the delegates in a paean to power and privilege, including the well-known lines, "To the right, ever to the right, never to the left, forever to the right." In the revival, the casting distracts our attention from who these men were and what they represented. One can forgive Stone and Edwards for their slight anachronism, by the way—the modern political usage of "left" and "right" is usually understood as having originated during the French Revolution, still some 15 years into the future.

It also bears noting that then-President Richard Nixon paid back-handed tribute to "Cool, Cool, Considerate Men" when he attempted unsuccessfully to have this satiric look at conservatives removed from the version of *1776* that was presented at the White House.

"Molasses to Rum," in which South Carolina delegate Rutledge taunts Adams and others by showing that much of Northern prosperity is tied to the slave trade Adams proposed to abolish, is perhaps the most flagrant example of the revival's tampering with the original *1776*. It departs from a realistic depiction of the events, adding an exaggerated choreographed scene of an imagined slave auction. The heavy-handed attempt to remind the audience of the slavery issue, a heavy-handedness all too common in this production, only winds up diverting attention from the matter at hand, the divisions among the delegates over slavery.

The actor who takes the role of Rutledge in the revival, Sara Porkalob, complained in an interview after the show had opened that Paulus and Page had slighted the issue of gender in favor of race. Porkalob, a Filipino-American, said that she had felt snubbed and overlooked, especially in her big moment of "Molasses to Rum." Porkalob was roundly denounced on social media after these comments. Jeffrey Page, without mentioning her by name, accused her of being "ungrateful and unwise."

The incident reflected the reactionary essence of the tribal competition that is encouraged by the identity politics industry. In this regard, the "POC" label is a reactionary invention that artificially amalgamates various ethnicities, only encouraging a battle of each against all for a share of the privilege and position aspired to by layers of the upper middle class. Another recent and widely reported example of this trend was the leak of racist recorded comments by highly placed Los Angeles City Council members.

It should also be noted that this is not the first time that Paulus has turned to musical theater classics of earlier generations and mangled them, largely because of her identity politics perspective. Ten years ago, she directed a Broadway revival of George and Ira Gershwin's classic, *Porgy and Bess*. At that time, she spoke of the need for "excavating" the role of Bess. She found fault with the Gershwins, and said it was necessary to make Bess "an understandable and fully rounded character." There was the insinuation that the Gershwins could not and did not understand their African-American characters. No less an authority than Stephen Sondheim wrote a letter to the *New York Times* at that time, sharply criticizing this claim.

The positive qualities of *1776* in its original version must not be overlooked because of the grave weaknesses of the current revival. The 1972 film based on the musical is well worth viewing, and is available in both DVD and streaming options.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site